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In Paper War, Flood of Liens Is the Weapon

By ERICA GOODE

MINNEAPOLIS — One of the first inklings Sheriff Richard Stanek had that something was wrong came with a call from the mortgage company handling his refinancing.

“It must be a mistake,” he said, when the loan officer told him that someone had placed liens totaling more than \$25 million on his house and on other properties he owned.

But as Sheriff Stanek soon learned, the liens, legal claims on property to secure the payment of a debt, were just the earliest salvos in a war of paper, waged by a couple who had lost their home to foreclosure in 2009 — a tactic that, with the spread of an anti-government ideology known as the “sovereign citizen” movement, is being employed more frequently as a way to retaliate against perceived injustices.

Over the next three years, the couple, Thomas and Lisa Eilertson, filed more than \$250 billion in liens, demands for compensatory damages and other claims against more than a dozen people, including the sheriff, county attorneys, the Hennepin County registrar of titles and other court officials.

“It affects your credit rating, it affected my wife, it affected my children,” Sheriff Stanek said of the liens. “We spent countless hours trying to undo it.”

Cases involving sovereign citizens are surfacing increasingly here in Minnesota and in other states, posing a challenge to law enforcement officers and court officials, who often become aware of the movement — a loose network of groups and individuals who do not recognize the authority of federal, state or municipal government — only when they become targets. Although the filing of liens for outrageous sums or other seemingly frivolous claims might appear laughable, dealing with them can be nightmarish, so much so that the F.B.I. has labeled the strategy “paper terrorism.”